Semiotic Approaches to Conspiracy Theories

1.3

SEMIOTIC APPROACHES TO CONSPIRACY THEORIES[1]

Massimo Leone, Mari-Liis Madison and Andreas Ventsel

Introduction

Especially after Donald Trump's presidential campaign and the Brexit referendum, public awareness of the power of viral conspiracy theories and their relationship to misinformation and fake news has risen significantly. It is thus appropriate to recall a definition of semiotics by Umberto Eco:

> semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all.
>
> *(Eco 1976: 7)*

Indeed, acknowledging the fundamental conventionality of sign processes and the accompanying possibility of lying and error are part of the core principles of the semiotic approach. Thus, a prominent purpose of semiotics is to analyse the success and failure of communication.

Semiotics developed into an independent discipline in the 1950s. Its research objects are the sign, sign relation and sign process. Although the notion of sign was already dealt with in antiquity (with the Stoics; Saint Augustine), the Middle Ages and early modernity (i.e. the problem of universals in scholasticism; John Locke), developments in structural linguistics, information theory, cybernetics and logic in the early twentieth century became the conditions for the emergence of semiotics as a discipline. Traditionally, semiotics is divided into two main currents, which are characterised by their fundamental difference in conceptualising the sign: The semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce and Charles W. Morris on the one hand, and the semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure on the other. This division reflects, to a certain extent, the disciplines most important to the development of semiotics and is further supported by the fact that Saussure's approach was popular in Europe (especially in France), while Peirce's was popular in the U.S.A.

Peirce represents a philosophically and logically informed approach, one that understands the sign as triadic and emphasises the importance of the sign process. He conceptualises the sign as a relation between the representamen (for example, the word 'conspiracy'), the object or reference (the general meaning of the word 'conspiracy' that is necessary for the communicability of

the sign) and the interpretant or the meaning evoked in the interpreter (the concrete meaning of the word 'conspiracy' depends on whether the latter's existence is presupposed or not). These relations are modified in the actual process of semiosis: The interpretation of the receiver becomes, for a second receiver, a sign that in turn evokes an interpretant, etc. The purpose of semiotics is to analyse, first, the relations forming the sign process and, second, the problems emerging from interpreting the three aspects of the sign.

Saussurean semiology conceptualises the sign as an intrasystemic arbitrary correlate between the signifier (for example, the word 'conspiracy') and the signified (conspiracy as an idea or mental concept). The concrete meaning of the sign emerges from the systemic relations to other signs and to the rules of association of signs. The meaning of the word 'conspiracy' depends on how it relates to other words in the same system, i.e. on the word's value within the system.

Although the two traditions differ in their understanding of the sign, they share a common purpose – to study not so much the perceived phenomenon itself but its meaning. In view of the fact that conspiracy theories are inherently semiotic phenomena (as they are always mediated via signs), it is surprising that relatively few studies concentrate on the semiotic explanation of conspiracy theories. Meaning-making in conspiracy theories is largely based on the search for secret signs of conspiracy and on demonstrating the significance of these signs. From the semiotic perspective, conspiracy theory is defined as a representation that explains a series of events by postulating a conspiracy as its cause; that is, the events are seen as 'the result of a group of people acting in secret to a nefarious end' (Birchall 2006: 216–7). In the preface of the special issue of semiotic journal *Lexia* dedicated to conspiracy theories (23–4, 2016), Massimo Leone argues that:

> If the work of semioticians on conspiracy theories has a purpose whatsoever, it is not that of indicating, from a supposedly superior vantage point, who is right and who is wrong, who is conspiring and who is not, who is creating a fake conspiracy theory and who is unveiling a dangerous social secret. The purpose of semiotics is, rather, that of indicating the discursive conditions that encourage the proliferation of such conspiratorial or anti–conspiratorial thinking, and simultaneously also the more difficult purpose of suggesting how to reframe conflict in a different discursive framework, one that does not simply create rhetorical conflict but casts the basis for social action.
>
> *(Leone 2016: 15)*

Generally speaking, the main focus of semiotics consists in explaining sign-based models that people construct for mapping reality; in most cases, they tend to be simplifying (Madisson 2016a). Thus, the semiotic approach can neither determine whether a conspiracy exists nor evaluate the adequacy and validity of a conspiracy theory. It does not appraise either whether they are a beneficial or a harmful cultural phenomenon; it rather concentrates on the specific processes of meaning-making that are related to conspiracy theories.

The semiotic point of view differentiates between three interrelated levels in analysing conspiracy theories. The first relates to modelling through a specific filter of interpretation that presupposes the existence of a conspiracy. Analysing this level enables us to ascertain the mechanisms of conspiracist semiosis. The second level concentrates on conspiracy theories as verbal and/or visual representations – conspiracy theories are analysed as a text with its own specific boundaries. This second level is also closely related to specific audiences and to communicational situations to which the representations of conspiracies are targeted. Receivers here construct certain meta-level interpretations, or, in other words, interpretations of a conspiracy theory. The third level concentrates on analysing the identity construction and self-description of publics that are affected by conspiracy theories.

The present chapter concentrates on these three levels: First, we describe the main characteristics of conspiracist semiosis; second, we deal with the semiotic study of representations of conspiracies; and, third, we question how semiotics could be useful in elucidating mechanisms of identity construction in the context of conspiracy theories. At the end of this section, we briefly outline some directions for future research.

Main characteristics of conspiracist semiosis

The conditions under which contemporary conspiracist thinking proliferates are complex. The major disruptions of the labour market and massive unemployment caused by economic crises, the unprecedented reconfiguration of social and communicative relations though the rapid evolution of digital media and the consequent shifting of political models cause a myriad of ideological contrapositions that feed, in their turn, the various levels and meta-levels of conspiracist thought.

It can thus be said that one of the main causes for the currency of conspiracy theories is the fear and confusion accompanying contemporary socio-cultural upheavals. In contemporary society, fear has become one of the most effective mobilising emotions (Bauman 2006; Castells 2009) and the media-fuelled proliferation of irrational fears is a powerful force undermining the capacity to critically assess the social world. The Tartu-Moscow school of cultural semiotics conceptualises the semiotic construction of conspiracy theories in relation to fear. Doing so, it elaborates both a semiotic approach to conspiracy theory and a semiotics of fear.

From the semiotic point of view, fear does not result from an actual horrifying event/object but from the fact that some elements of reality are interpreted as fearful omens and warning signs. Juri Lotman stresses that fear is not always triggered by danger, but, on the contrary, fear often pre-emptively triggers danger. The object of fear, indeed, is socially constructed through the semiotic codes that a collectivity adopts for modelling itself and the world (Lotman 1998). The dynamic of fear, thus, is inherently semiotic. The time lapse between the immediate experience of the object of fear and the interpretation of it allows meaning-making processes to intensify (M. Lotman 2009: 210).

Conspiracy theories are central epiphenomena of this kind of meaning-making in the context of an atmosphere of fear (M. Lotman 2009: 211). Conspiracy theories function as meaning-making templates, originating from cultural memory. They are instrumental in construing the danger of a certain tendency or event and in connecting it with historical scars as well as with horrific future scenarios.

The semiotic process that explains the emergence of fear and conspiracy theories is that of communion. The language of fear – and, consequently, the logic of conspiracy theories – is based upon communion in two forms. First, there is the penetrating contact, upon which the interacting subjects/objects enter into each other. As a result of this process, one party becomes branded with the traces of the other. Communion via penetrating contact thus functions according to the metonymic logic of contiguity – it suffices simply that one is present near the source of evil in order to be affected by it. The second form of communion is based on similarity – the more similar the objects, the more they are perceived to be connected. According to M. Lotman, then, conspiracy theories are characterised by both the metonymic logic of penetrating contact and the metaphoric logic based on similarity (2009: 1239).

When dealing with conspiracy theories, it is important to note that the opacity of reference plays a much larger role in cultural phobias than in individual ones. Reference is often very intense – while we cannot put our finger on why something is dangerous, we are nevertheless certain that it must be destroyed. Although the signs of natural languages are provided with

strong reference by the sign's concrete meaning, the logic of fear is exactly the opposite. The most general and vague fears actively search for potential referents; individuals who are obsessed with conspiracies will no doubt find them, for example, in the visual representations of Coca-Cola, but also in geometrical shapes of any kind (M. Lotman 2009: 1244).

This type of semiosis, which is based on analogies unintelligible to outsiders, is explicated by Umberto Eco (1990) through the concepts of paranoid interpretation and hermetic semiosis. In this type of semiosis, every time that a new analogy is discovered, it brings about, in turn, a new analogy, and so on and so forth ad infinitum. The loose criterion of similarity established in hermetic semiosis gives rise to the assumption that the function of a sign consists in signifying a hidden meaning (Eco 1990: 163–6). Hence one important principle of hermetic semiosis: When two things are similar, the former is a sign of the latter and vice versa (Eco 1990: 164).

For example, conspiracy theorists tend to disagree with the media coverage of various shocking events for they, the conspiracy theorists, believe that journalists are using such events as a smoke screen to distract public attention and keep it occupied with 'pseudo-topics' while conspirators perform their evil deeds undisturbed. Nevertheless, that does not mean that conspiracy theorists are not interested in media. On the contrary, they often work through numerous visual and verbal narratives, enabling them to prove that there are paradoxes and contradictions in the official versions of events, because conspiracy theorists sometimes presume that the conspirators make mistakes and leave compromising traces that prove the existence of the conspiracy itself. Thus, they carefully examine media content in order to find interpretative keys that disclose hidden meanings.

Mark Fenster also points out that a conspiracy theorist sees even trivial everyday events as signs of manipulation by conspiring forces. Fenster outlines that conspiracy theories function as 'a form of hyperactive semiosis in which history and politics serve as reservoirs of signs that demand (over)interpretation, and that signify, for the interpreter, far more than their conventional meaning' (Fenster 2008: 95). Fenster, however, also underlines that such interpretative practices may be paradoxical but are not pathologically paranoiac, for they reflect their specific social and political conditions (Fenster 2008: 101).

Eco's theory of interpretation is also the point of departure of Massimo Leone's long essay 'Double Debunking: Modern Divination and the End of Semiotics' (2015), which compares present-day conspiracist thought with ancient divination and underlines the role of semiotics in providing a framework of reasonableness for both the debunking of unsubstantiated persuasion and the parallel debunking of conspiracy theories. In another article, 'Fundamentalism, Anomie, Conspiracy: Umberto Eco's Semiotics against Interpretive Irrationality' (2017), the same author claims that the issue of determining the role and effect of conspiracy theories in society comes down to the need of differentiating between critical and conspiracy theories, between deconstructive and conspiracy hermeneutics. Nevertheless, Leone contends, such distinction cannot be made in terms of contents; it must be made in terms of argumentative patterns. Conspiracy theories do not show their nature in what they say, but in how they say it, in the specific rhetoric that they adopt in order to communicate an aura of secrecy, create a symbolic elite, and reproduce the separation between insiders and outsiders. Here, according to Leone (2017), lies the main role of semiotics: Singling out the rhetorical and argumentative lines though which conspiracy theories are created and maintained in the social imaginary.

Building on this, Leone (2018a) has started to develop a semiotic reading of the traditional philosophical and social concept of 'common sense', arguing that conspiracy theories are disruptive of this important framework of public discourse. That which is usually called 'common sense' is nothing but the complex deposit of implicit cognitive, pragmatic and emotional rules through which the members of a society interact with each other and, simultaneously, affirm

their belonging to the group. This sense is called 'common' both because it is current – meaning that it permeates the daily life of the group in all its manifestations – and because it is shared: It is something that belongs to the community as a whole and something through which, at the same time, the members of the community can belong. Proliferation of conspiracist discourse in a society creates micro-areas of shared meaning that are impermeable and in conflict with each other, and give rise, thus, to a fragile mismatching between a political community and its semiosphere of shared conversation. A key contribution of semiotics in this domain, then, is to provide insights on the formation of reasonable interpretations, as opposed to the unreasonable ones of conspiracy theories. Leone (2018b) inquires about the difference between interpreting in natural sciences and interpreting in the humanities. Despite evident and known divergences, humanities, too, can rank their interpretations and aspire to guide the interpretations of society. Three alternative methods can be used to test interpretive hypotheses, depending on whether the author's, the reader's or the text's meaningful intentionality is primarily investigated. The third method is superior to the first two since it leads to the creation of a common meta-discursive space for inter-subjective exchange about meaning. Although adopting an appropriate methodology is essential in textual analysis, that which is even more important is supporting the creation of a community of interpreters that, sharing the same method, engage in the constructive comparison and ranking of interpretive moves. The patient construction of this community of reasonable interpreters is the best antidote to divisive and conflictive conspiracy theories.

Code-text as a unifying mechanism of conspiracist semiosis

Along the same line, Mari-Liis Madisson's work conceptualises conspiracy theories as a specific way of semiotic modelling, mostly relying on the theoretical frameworks of the Tartu-Moscow school of cultural semiotics and on Umberto Eco's ideas. A central aim of Madisson's works consists in demonstrating that conspiracy theories are dominated by mythological modelling, which plays an essential role in how they produce homomorphic resemblance. Mythological modelling, otherwise prevalent in pre-literary, oral cultures, gains ground in contemporary times under the conditions of social stress and fear (Lotman 1988a). According to Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenskij, mythological modelling is characterised by its focus on the sacral order, contained in a trans-cultural meta-text. This meta-text functions as a universal precedent, an invariant from which all the variants that comprise the world as perceived by mythological consciousness are derived (Lotman, Uspenskij 1978: 211). The authors indicate that clear examples of those meta-texts cannot be found in contemporary culture, for they were characteristic of archaic communities where they, along with rituals, formed a basis of the belief-system of archaic communities (Lotman, Uspenskij 1975: 24). Mythological modelling transforms the perception of present events to the extent that the interpreter can recognise, behind them, the original forms of the meta-text that has its source in cultural memory. Mythological modelling of contemporary conspiracy theories is not so intense and clear-cut as the one in archaic communities, but it still organises a specific kind of meaning-making that does not perceive events as a coincidence of tragic contingencies, but instead as motivated by one and the same original cause: Evil.

The model of mythological semiosis makes it possible to analyse how conspiracy theoretical meaning-making mixes together ideologies from disparate political movements, ideologies that are often contradictory. Les Back has developed the concept of 'liquid ideologies' in order to explain how extreme right-wing movements tend to use generally accepted discourses for the purpose of legitimising their own ethno-centric media practices (Back 2002). Although radical

right-wing groups express certain continuity with Fascism and Nazism, they are today no longer strictly defined by these historical ideologies. This is due, on the one hand, to the negative general attitude towards Nazism in the post-Second World War period and, on the other, to the transformation of the space of communication and its mechanisms, since online communication is not organised so much from top to bottom, but is horizontal, a characteristic that makes it difficult to consciously control the development of ideologies. Madisson (2014, 2016a) explains this type of logic of connecting discrete elements by conceptualising conspiracy in terms of the code text that functions as a syntagmatically constructed totality, an organised structure of signs that is not expressed indirectly, but is realised as variants in the lower-level texts in the hierarchy of culture (Lotman 1988b: 35). The concept of code text enables us to explicate those situations of meaning-making that cannot be conceptualised according to the analogy mechanism proposed by Eco.

Non-mythological or descriptive types of modelling also play a significant role in conspiracy theories. Conspirers are usually interpreted as an extremely organised group, divided into intricate sub-systems. For example, a study on Facebook Estonian extreme right-wing content demonstrates that people often refer to a widespread systematic conspiracy bringing together cultural Marxists (this label applies to almost all left-wing or liberal public figures), L.G.B.T.Q. activists, Islamists, mainstream political forces and dominant media. The study shows that the coordinated malicious deeds of presumed conspirators are seen as associated with the low birth-rate of white Europeans, facilitating the migrant crisis and terrorism, the 'Islamization' of Europe and the eradication of nation-states (Kasekamp *et al.* 2018: 8). Social events are interpreted in light of overly deterministic models of causation (see Madisson 2014: 296–8).

The co-functioning of mythological and non-mythological types of modelling can be captured through the concept of code-text (Madisson 2016a: 33). The code-text functions as an informational centre that gives a unified meaning to essentially different text-elements, which are initially independent (e.g. minority groups, terrorism, low birth-rates) but are all identified as similar – as a means of intentional damage, manipulated by conspirators. For an external observer, code-text may be both ambivalent and polyvalent, to be divided into a paradigm of equivalent yet different meanings, or again into a system of antonymic oppositions, but for the inhabitants of the culture 'the code-text is nevertheless monolithic, compact and unambiguous […] organizing their memories and defining the limits to the possible variations of the text' (Lotman 1988b: 36).

Conspiracy theories as representations

Semiotics enables the systematic study of interpretations of conspiracies expressed in concrete media – or, in other words, the study of representations – for example, in a written narrative or an audio-visual text. The levels of conspiracist semiosis and representation of conspiracy are, of course, closely related to each other (the former is usually the precondition for the emergence of the latter). However, it is useful to distinguish them analytically because the latter is characterised by its textual and concrete existence, by a higher level of organisation and by its specific position in the communicative context. This is also the reason why representations of conspiracy are more amenable to research using the methods of textual analysis. In addition, this aspect enables one to explicate cases where the person spreading conspiracy theories is not directly engaged in an active interpretation of a secret plot, but instead has other purposes in propagating those theories, for example, creating an aesthetic experience, persuasion, disinformation, etc. To summarise, the chapter thus far has dealt with the topic of discovering conspiracies and with the logic of connection between elements of conspiracy; the rest of the chapter will focus on the

representation of conspiracies, the construction of conspiracy theories and with conspiracy theories as a specific type of text.

From the semiotic perspective, it is noteworthy that, although a conspiracy theory can appear in different contexts and be transmitted via various channels, it nevertheless remains recognisable as a conspiracy theory – as a text sustaining specific connections. The range of media through which conspiracy theories are transmitted is extremely broad: Speech, the printed word, pictorial means of expression (drawings, diagrams, photos), videos and contemporary interactive and hybrid textual compositions combining all of the above. In addition, conspiracy theories are produced in various discourses, from the dominant to the peripheral.

One of the purposes of a semiotic study of conspiracy theories is to explicate the invariant relations or mechanisms of meaning-making that are common to all representations of conspiracy theories. Theoretical tools from cultural semiotics provide an opportunity to systematise disparate studies in various disciplines into a coherent theory of the signifying logic of conspiracy theories. One of these tools is, for example, the opposition of discrete and iconic/continuous modelling (in Lotman's theory, the latter is synonymous with mythological modelling). To generalise, conspiracy theory as a textual type can be classified as narrative (see Birchall 2006; Fenster 2008; Butter 2014), since it depicts actors involved in and events connected to the conspiracy, and the principal signifying relations in conspiracy theories are those of temporality and causality (in other words, discrete modelling). It is, however, important to note that the causality outlined in conspiracy narratives is characterised by its subordination to the evil will of the conspirators, who are often depicted as being supernaturally powerful (Knight 2002; Campion-Vincent 2007; Madisson 2014, 2017). Representing the past or future damage done by the conspiracies, conspiracy theories sketch analogies (the principal signifying relation of iconic-continuous modelling) to the natural malevolence of secret societies.

As is often the case with theoretical models, mapping conspiracy theory as a textual type can lead to over-simplification and, thus, does not enable one to grasp the detailed nature of both the form and the content of conspiracy theories. This type of study, however, explicates the basic relations at work in conspiracy theories and helps researchers in deciding whether certain concrete representations could and should be regarded as conspiracy theories. As a development to this theory, conspiracy theories could be articulated into typologies mapping the variance of conspiracy theories or the representation of their basic elements (conspirators, nature of the conspiracy, victims of the conspiracy, secondary events related to the conspiracy) on the scale of discrete-non-discrete modelling. Considering conspiracy theory as a textual type could likewise answer the question of the minimal expression of conspiracies or, in other words, attempt to explicate which short textual forms (e.g. tweets, memes, status updates) can be considered conspiracy theories.

In addition to mapping the invariant characteristics of conspiracy theories, semiotics provides us with multi-faceted tools to analyse how the representations of conspiracies are constructed. For instance, frameworks of literary semiotics and narratology (Eco 1979; Genette 1980; Greimas 1983) enable us to explicate the principles of constructing concrete fictional conspiracy narratives (e.g. novels and films), the relations between plot and story, the devices for creating narrative tension and culmination, the motives underpinning the text, the narrator's position in relation to the narrative, textual milieu and tonality, etc. Semiotics regards non-fictional conspiracy narratives commonly as cases of historical (see Fenster 2008: 123) or everyday narratives (e.g. documentaries, news stories, vernacular explanations for events). Thus, the framework of classic semiotic discourse analysis (Eco 1976; Greimas, Courtès 1976; Barthes 1981; 1986) can be used to analyse the position of conspiracy events in historical-geographical and socio-cultural systems, the attribution of agency, the narrator's relation to the narrative, widespread textual tropes, the types of argumentation, ideological sub-texts, etc.

These cases where representations of conspiracy from different genres and textual spheres intermingle and form a specific explanatory whole (see Boym 1999; Cobley 2004; Ponzio 2016) are of special interest to semiotic research. For instance, non-fictional conspiracy narratives sometimes rely on influential fictional conspiracies, e.g. Don DeLillo's *Libra* or Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. These fictions are inexhaustible sources of analogies and sometimes even function as allegedly prophetic works dealing with real historical events. There have also been cases where novelists weave references to conspiracy theories similar to historical narratives into their works; for example, Umberto Eco's *The Prague Cemetery* clearly refers to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and to theories about the Illuminati. Constructing these kinds of intertextual conspiracy representations has become especially important in the context of the signifying possibilities of hypermedia (adding hyperlinks, simple copying of textual fragments) and of the reference-heavy textual construction norms of participatory culture.

With online media and means of digital expression becoming central to conspiracy narratives, the function of visual and multimodal elements in representations of conspiracy needs to be interrogated. On the one hand, semiotics studies which visual tropes and symbols are used to illustrate conspiracies (for example, the pyramid, the octopus, the puppet master and the marionette are among the most widespread) (Ballinger 2011). On the other hand, the frameworks of semiotics (see Barthes 1977; Kress, van Leeuwen 1996; 2001) explain how conspiracy theories amplify their core ideas via visual modes of expression (e.g. underlining, foregrounding, usage of diagrams and graphs) and, doing this, inject them with emotional valence (see Caumanns 2016; Kimminich 2016; Turco 2016).

Representations of conspiracy are always constructed in view of concrete addressees and communication situations, which is why it is important to analyse how these representations relate to the larger socio-communicative context. The following section deals with the construction of identities via conspiracy theories or, more precisely, with the self-descriptions and auto-communication of conspiracy theorists.

Conspiracy theories as a mechanism of identity creation

In the Saussurean tradition of semiotics, identity studies are an important field of research. Identity construction is closely connected to sign values. Conspiracy theorists tend to rely on a polarised logic of identification that is dominated by positing an antithetical opposition between 'us' and 'them'. The 'antithetical' model of culture (anti-culture) can be seen as a type of identity creation relegated to the 'inner' point of view of cultures that, imposing a strict principle of normativity (correctness) to their systems of expression, regard deviations in the plane of expression as disruptive of the order of meaning, rather than meaningless. From the point of view of one's own culture, anti-culture is understood as a sign-system that is dangerous to culture (Ventsel 2016a: 315; Ventsel 2016b). When an antithetic *enemy* is created, it is often constructed as a symmetrical copy of *one's own* structures with a minus sign or a mirror projection (Lotman, Uspenskij 1984). Mirror projection is often preceded by plain projection: First, 'our' problems are attributed to 'them'; second, the mirror-projective antithesis is created: 'their' problems are contrasted with the zero marker or absence of problems in 'our' structure (Lepik, 2008: 72). Such a semiotic opposition has a specific function in the constitution of a conspiracy theory as a semiotic unit. It is the dominant component that guarantees the integrity of the structure, 'focuses, rules, determines, and transforms the remaining ones' (Jakobson 1971: 82). These kinds of core structures are often rigidly organised. The villains imagined by conspiracy theorists, be they the NWO, Bilderbergers, the Jews, etc., are all understood as something that needs to be detected and eradicated from the social structure. In many cases, agents/social structures are

demonised as evil, as the antithetic enemy of a constructed 'us' (Ventsel 2016a: 325). That is illustrated by the series of polarisations that characterise 'us' and 'them' (enemies): Lightness–darkness, nationalism–cosmopolitanism, prosperity of culture–cultural disaster, honesty–corruption, etc. (ibid., 315–6). Both the concrete articulations of and the degrees of belief in identities construed on the basis of such antithetic oppositions vary in each specific case, but the core opposition is characteristic of different conspiracy theories – as such, the opposition can be understood as making it possible to mark down the boundaries of a new community.

From the semiotic perspective, however, the cases in which conspiracy theories attempt to construct an internal, hidden enemy are perhaps more important. Here it is appropriate to return briefly to the semiotics of fear. Mihhail Lotman stresses, in connection with the atmosphere of fear, that the most intense fear is not directed towards the evidently 'other' but towards the other that presents itself as familiar, as one's own. Although those who are labelled as internal enemies often do not have much in common among themselves – for example, they are radicals from entirely opposing extremes, belong to different social groups, represent different nationalities, etc. – they are nevertheless described with similar or even identical semiotic models and signs. As a result, in socio-cultural environments there exists a semantic invariant for the figure of the enemy that is attributed to specific referents only in concrete situations (M. Lotman 2009).

As regards the causes for this semiotic mechanism, according to Mihhail Lotman, the referent of the sign becomes changeable: 1) when a given semantic set (for example, the Jews) resonates with the deep mechanisms of a given culture, so that the set can be recognised according to the invariant of the archetypal enemy; and 2) when a given culture expresses the need for an enemy, for the place of the referent cannot remain empty (2009: 1228). The search for such an enemy intensifies during social crises; Russian enemies, for instance, (be they the 'Chechen terrorist', the 'Georgian nationalist', the 'Estonian fascist' or the 'American imperialist') are all suspiciously sketched in a similar way – from the semiotic perspective, they all have the complexion of a specifically Russian fear. It can be concluded, thus, that it is not such or such specific event that gives rise to fear; fear, instead, emerges while searching for its own justifications, according to cultural mechanisms that codify the reality of fear in their own likeness (M. Lotman 2009: 1231).

Autocommunication and self-description of conspiracy theorists

The above section pointed out the ways in which the elements of the opposition 'us' versus 'them' condition each other semiotically. A possibility to study identity construction in depth would consist in focusing on the addresser, that is, on the conspiracy theorists and their self-description. But on what kind of logic is this self-communication built?

Madisson and Ventsel have studied conspiracy theories that circulate on Estonian extreme-right websites. Conspiracy theories function as a basic rhetorical tool for rationalising the extreme right-wing worldview for both the believers and other interpreters. Conspiracy theories allow extreme right-wing authors to translate their feelings of intolerance, fear, anger and moral superiority from the level of personal conviction into more tangible and explicit language that can also be shared with others (Madisson 2016b; Madisson, Ventsel 2016a; 2018). Madisson and Ventsel (2016b), moreover, suggest that conspiracy theories are a significant component of extreme-right echo-chamber communication, which reproduces subcultural stereotypes and is generally closed in nature.

The cultural semiotic concept of auto-communication enables us to explicate which semiotic mechanisms sustain the closed communication of the believers in conspiracy theories. In

auto-communicative meaning-making, the culture (i.e. the abstract 'me') is trying to increase its internal information, to improve its quality and to transform itself (Torop 2008: 729). Information is selected auto-communicatively and is predominantly open to associations that the potential addressee already knows (Madisson, Ventsel 2016a). Members of extreme right-wing communities who believe in particular conspiracy theories do not tend to be receptive or exposed to fundamentally different lines of thought. This semantic shift becomes possible only if a new code is added and, through that code, the previously known information is given new meaning. For example, the online discourse of Estonian extreme rightists ('Islamic migrants' are a threat to white Estonians, and part of a bigger E.U. plan to undermine the independence of the Estonian Republic) can be interpreted according to an economic code ('migrants are threatening the sustainability of the country because they "steal" jobs and encumber economic growth'), a social code ('providing social benefits to foreigners jeopardises the social welfare of Estonians') or a cultural code ('they wear burkas and aggressively spread their religion, which is dangerous for Estonian culture'). If a new code is added, the auto-communicative framework of associations that organises various extreme interpretations is confirmed once again. It widens and deepens the cluster of reasons for which the national spirit and the white race can be presented as being under serious threat (Madisson, Ventsel 2016a, 2016b). The extreme-right (auto) communication is an ongoing process of interpretation, but the semantics of the message is predetermined by a limited number of stereotypes and does not allow exchange of new information.

One central characteristic of this kind of conspiracy theorist's meaning-making is the tendency to identify with the normative text as opposed to an aggregate of rules according to which texts are created. In meaning-making that is oriented towards texts, the self views itself as a sum of precedents, cases of usages and texts (Lotman 2010: 61), while the normative ('the correct') is equated with the existence of that semiotic unity. In the case of the self-description of Estonian extreme-right bloggers, these normative texts can be concrete historical texts, e.g. the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia. The other widespread type of text is framed by the collective memory-texts of the community, including the general *text of victimhood*, which in the Estonian context is often associated with the 700-year history of serfdom, with the Soviet deportations and with the Soviet occupation (Madisson, Ventsel 2016a).

Conclusion and future directions

There are relatively few studies that explicitly tackle semiotic aspects of conspiracy theories. But the research topic enjoys a growing popularity within the international community of semioticians, who are alert to how, in the so-called 'post-truth era', conspiracist rhetoric and the hermeneutics of suspicion are in the ascendancy in discourses that unfold in both traditional and social media. For example, *Lexia*, the international journal of semiotics, recently devoted a hefty issue (23/24) to the topic, seeking to cast a fresh look at conspiracy thought and conspiracy theories by combining semiotics and other qualitative methods.

For instance, the analyses demonstrate that there is an unbridgeable divide between those who believe that the importance of vaccines is artificially inflated by pharmaceutical companies and those who label such views 'conspiracy theories' that can damage democracy through their rhetorical sleight-of-hand (a position that in itself sometimes characterises the attack on democracy as something akin to a conspiracy). Nevertheless, the gap between the two positions is less a matter of logic than semiotics. Even if one side or the other can be scientifically proven to be right or wrong, it is unlikely to heal the rift. People do not disagree and fight with each other because they believe in diverging conspiracy theories; instead, it is arguable that people who

believe in discrepant conspiracy theories do so because they *want* to disagree, to give vent to the tensions that underpin society and that fail to find other channels for expression.

Future semiotic research on conspiracy theories might focus on their capacity to influence worldviews; such research should entail interdisciplinary collaboration. Contemporary communication is performed at an increasingly fast pace and is dominated by affective reactions to current events – a tendency enabled by the prevalence of emotionally and visually oriented messages. The information overload in social media communication has increased the relevance of focusers or filters of attention that can bring attention to a certain topic or event (Tufekci 2013: 856). People are more willing to share content that is perceived as novel, intriguing and somewhat mysterious or obscure. The affective aspect is intensified by fake news, conspiracy theories and so on, whose intriguing and sensational nature enables them to enact the attention-grabbing effect, increasing traffic to certain sites by creating a certain agenda. From a semiotic perspective, affect is an inseparable component of discourse and, thus, can be analysed by using Peirce's categories to explicate the interrelations between the emotional (affective) and the argumentative (discursive) aspects of meaning-making in conspiracy theories and its function as attention grabber.

Future studies should explain how some conspiracy theorists exploit the characteristics of particular interpretative communities and how their storytelling practices create a fertile ground for user-generated content supporting their agenda. Semiotics enables the analysis of the relationship between conspiracy theories and audiences and their meta-interpretations, and, in this context, several authors have dealt with the problem of constructing the audience. Eco (1979) has developed the concept of the model reader; Juri Lotman (1982) has coined the concept of the image of audience. Both authors show how text constructs its own audience, and both provide concrete analytical tools for studying this phenomenon. Integrating them into academic studies on conspiracy theories would lead to a semiotic approach to strategic conspiracy theories. Future research should also explicate how different media support each other in particular representations of conspiracy, what are the dominant types of meaning-making and what kind of identification processes are related with particular strategic conspiracy narratives.

Note

1 This work was supported by the research grants PRG314 'Semiotic fitting as a mechanism of biocultural diversity: instability and sustainability in novel environments' and PUTJD804 'Semiotic perspective on the analysis of strategic conspiracy narratives'.

References

Back, L. (2002) 'When hate speaks the language of love', paper presented at Social Movement Studies Conference, London School of Economics, April.

Ballinger, D. (2011) *Conspiratoria – The Internet and the logic of conspiracy theory*, unpublished thesis, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

Barthes, R. (1977) *Image-music-text*, London: Fontana.

Barthes, R. (1981) 'The discourse of history', *Comparative Criticism*, 3(1): 7–20.

Barthes, R. (1986) *The rustle of language*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Bauman, Z. (2006) *Liquid fear*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Birchall, C. (2006) *Knowledge goes pop*, Oxford, New York: Berg.

Boym, S. (1999) 'Conspiracy theories and literary ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and the protocols of Zion', *Comparative literature*, 51(2): 97–122.

Butter, M. (2014) *Plots, designs, and schemes: American conspiracy theories from the Puritans to the present*, Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter.

Campion-Vincent, V. (2007) 'From evil others to evil elites: a dominant pattern in conspiracy theories today', in G.A. Fine, V. Campion-Vincent, C. Heath (eds.) *Rumor mills: the social impact of rumor and legend*, New Jersey/New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, pp. 103–22.
Castells, M. (2009) *Communication power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Caumanns, U. (2016) 'Performing and communicating conspiracy theories: Stalinist show trials in eastern Europe during the Cold War', *Lexia*, 23–4: 269–88.
Cobley, P. (2004) 'The semiotics of paranoia: the thriller, abduction and the self', *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*, pp. 148, 317–35.
Eco, U. (1976) *A Theory of semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Eco, U. (1979) *Lector in fabula: la cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*, Milano: Bompiani.
Eco, U. (1990) *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, Cambridge: World, History, Texts Tanner Lectures.
Fenster, M. (2008) *Conspiracy theories: secrecy and power in American culture*, Florida: University of Florida.
Genette, G. (1980) *Narrative discourse*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Greimas, A. (1983) *Structural semantics: an attempt at method*, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.
Greimas, A. and Courtès, J. (1976) 'The cognitive dimension of narrative discourse', *New Literary History*, 7(3): 433–47.
Jakobson, R. (1971) 'The dominant', in L. Matejka and K. Pomorska (eds.) *Readings in Russian poetics: formalist and structuralist views*, Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 82–7.
Kasekamp, A., Madisson, M. and Wierenga, L.J. (2018) 'Discursive opportunities for the Estonian populist radical right in a digital society', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 66(1): 1−12.
Kimminich, E. (2016) 'About grounding, courting and truthifying: conspiratorial fragments and patterns of social construction of reality in rhetoric, media and images', *Lexia*, 23(24): 35–54.
Knight, P. (2002) *Conspiracy Nation: the politics of paranoia in postwar America*, NY: New York University Press.
Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (1996) *Reading images: the grammar of visual design*, London: Routledge.
Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2001) *Multimodal discourse: the modes and media of contemporary communication*, London: Arnold.
Leone, M. (2015) 'Double debunking: modern divination and the end of semiotics', *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, 11(4), 433–77.
Leone, M. (2016) 'Preface', in 'Complotto/Conspiracy', *Lexia*, 23–4: 2–16.
Leone, M. (2017) 'Fundamentalism, anomie, conspiracy: Umberto Eco's semiotics against interpretive irrationality' in T. Thellefsen (ed.) *Umberto Eco in his own words*, Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, pp. 221–9.
Leone, M. (2018a) 'Rationality and reasonableness in textual interpretation', in A. Olteanu, A. Stables and D. Borţun (eds.) *Meanings & Co.: the interdisciplinarity of communication, semiotics and multimodality*, Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 53–70.
Leone, M. (2018b) 'The semiotics of common sense: patterns of meaning-sharing in the semiosphere', *Semiotica*, 226(1): 225–41.
Lepik, P. (2008) *Universals in the context of Juri Lotman's semiotics*. Tartu: Tartu University Press.
Lotman, J. (1982) 'The text and the structure of its audience', *New Literary History: a Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, 14(1): 81–7.
Lotman, J. (1988a) 'Технический прогресс как культурологическая проблема. [Progress of technology as problem of culturology]', Труды по знаковым системам *Vol. 22:* Зеркало*:* Семиотика зеркальности, pp. 97–116.
Lotman, J. (1988b) 'Text within a text', *Soviet Psychology*, 26(3): 32–51.
Lotman, J. (1998) 'Охота за ведьмами. Семиотика страха. [Witch-hunt: semiotics of fear]', *Sign Systems Studies*, 26: 61–80.
Lotman, J. (2010) 'Kultuuri õpetamise' probleem kui tüpoloogiline karakteristik. [The problem of teaching a culture as its typological characteristics]', in S. Salupere (ed.) *Kultuuritüpoloogiast*, Tartu: Tartu University Press, pp. 60–80.
Lotman, J. and Uspenskii, B. (1975) 'Myth – name – culture', *Soviet Studies in Literature*, 11(2–3): 17–46.
Lotman, J, and Uspenskij, B. (1978) 'On the semiotic mechanism of culture', *New Literary History*, 9(2): 211–32.
Lotman J. and Uspenskij B. (1984) 'The role of dual models in the dynamics of Russian culture (up to the end of the eighteenth century)', in M. Jurij, J. Lotman and B. Uspenskij, *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, pp. 3–35.

Lotman, M. (2009) 'Hirmusemootika ja vene kultuuri tüpoloogia [Semiotics of fear and typology of Russian culture] I–VI', *Akadeemia*, 1: 191–215; 2: 429–55; 3: 631–47; 5: 1035–64; 6: 1217–48.

Madisson, M. (2014) 'The semiotic logic of signification of conspiracy theories', *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*, 202: 273–300.

Madisson, M. (2016a) *The Semiotic construction of identities in hypermedia environments: the analysis of online communication of the Estonian extreme right*, Tartu: Tartu University Press.

Madisson, M. (2016b) 'NWO conspiracy theory: a key frame in online communication of Estonian extreme right', *Lexia*, 23(24): 117–36.

Madisson, M. (2017) 'Representation of the Snowden scandal in Estonian media: the construction of threats and fear', *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 69: 145–68.

Madisson, M. and Ventsel, A. (2016a) '"Freedom of speech" in the self-descriptions of the Estonian extreme right groupuscules', *National Identities*, 18(2): 89–104.

Madisson, M. and Ventsel, A. (2016b) 'Autocommunicative meaning-making in online-communication of Estonian extreme right', *Sign Systems Studies*, 44(3): 326–54.

Madisson, M. and Ventsel, A. (2018) 'Groupuscular identity-creation in online communication of Estonian extreme right', *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*, 222: 25–46.

Ponzio, J. (2016) 'Upsetting national events and conspiracy narratives in contemporary Italian literature', *Lexia*, 23(24): 345–66.

Torop, P. (2008) 'Multimeedialisus', *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 8(9): 721–34.

Tufekci, Z. (2013) '"Not this one": Social movements, the attention economy, and microcelebrity networked activism', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(7): 848–70.

Turco, F. (2016) '"It's all the President's fault". Tricks, conspiracies, and corruption in the American TV series set at the white house: homeland and scandal', *Lexia*, 23–4: 427–42.

Ventsel, A. (2016a) 'Political potentiality of conspiracy theories', *Lexia*, 23–4: 309–26.

Ventsel, A. (2016b) 'Rhetorical transformation in Estonian political discourse during World War II', *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*, 208: 103–32.